

Negotiators Meet 5 Hours at Panmunjom on Pueblo

By PETER GROSE

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 19—United States and North Korean negotiators discussed the Pueblo deadlock for nearly five hours at Panmunjom today, the State Department announced. It was the longest meeting in almost 11 months of desultory talks.

Declining comment on the substance of the discussion, which began at 9 o'clock last night, Washington time, United States officials gave indications that agreement to release the 82 crewmen of the electronic intelligence vessel was close, but not yet finally concluded.

This was the 27th time the two sides have met since the seizure of the Pueblo, and it came only 48 hours after the previous lengthy session—indicating that movement has developed after the long impasse.

State Department officials said that the families of the servicemen were informed today that all the prisoners were in good health. That word was apparently based on information conveyed by the North Korean representatives at the latest meeting.

At the same time, the Administration strove to dampen speculation that North Korea had finally agreed to hand back the prisoners, or that a settlement was all wrapped up.

If agreement in principle has been reached, as stated in news reports from here and Seoul, South Korea, details remain to

be confirmed by the two governments. In a sensitive negotiating situation hitches could develop that could prevent the release of the men by Christmas.

Foremost among the unresolved points are the precise time and place for the men to be handed back.

The two sides have worked over the draft of a statement to be made by the United States, a text ambiguous enough so that North Korea could interpret it as an apology while the United States would not consider it an admission that the Pueblo had in fact violated North Korean territorial waters before her seizure Jan. 23.

The Administration is reported to have been willing to submit such a statement for many months past, but only at the very time that the prisoners are being returned to United States custody, preferably at Panmunjom itself. Until firm agreement on this point has been reached, the settlement cannot be considered to be complete.

State Department officials re-

acted angrily to dispatches carried by The Associated Press and United Press International this afternoon stating that North Korea had agreed to return the prisoners. The report was attributed to "a high Government source" and to "Congressional sources."

"Reports along this line could endanger the well-being of American servicemen held prisoner," one official complained.

At the same time, the department refused to deny the reports, offer off-the-record guidance to reporters or depart in any way from its strict policy of "no comment."

Robert J. McCloskey, the department spokesman, was pressed repeatedly at his news briefing for clarification. "I expect there will be another meeting and I cannot, at this point, tell you when," he said.

With Mr. McCloskey's temper beginning to get the better of his normal diplomatic aplomb, the questioning continued:

"Do you have any idea how many more meetings there might be?"

"No, I do not."

"Was there progress reported at this long meeting [last night]?"

"No comment."

"Do you feel there is some hope now that the crew might be released?"

"I would not want to express it one way or another, and I hope you will bear with us."

Skipper's Wife Doubtful

SAN DIEGO, Dec. 19 (AP)—Mrs. Lloyd Bucher, wife of the skipper of the Pueblo, said today she had received no word of his possible release.

"I have had no confirmation of these rumors from any source. This is not the first time such rumors have been published and I won't believe them until Pete walks in the door."

One of Commander Bucher's close friends, Lieut. Comdr. Alan Hemphill, said Mrs. Bucher had not been notified to stand by or leave word where she could be reached in the event of the crew's release.